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# Redefining Psychology Methodologically, Metatheoretically, Pedagogically and Ethically

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## Redefining Psychology Methodologically, Metatheoretically, Pedagogically and Ethically

A review of Benjamin Bradley, *Psychology and Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Stanton Wortham, University of Pennsylvania

Psychology is an unusual discipline because of interconnections between its object and its method, its subjects and its practitioners. Psychologists investigate people and their experiences, and psychological research methods depend on scientists' experiences. Psychologists do research about people who are much like them, such that psychology's findings should apply to the scientists too. In *Psychology and Experience*, Benjamin Bradley points out these interconnections in order to describe an increasingly ironic fact: as psychology learns more about people and their experience, we are discovering that many of the discipline's methodological assumptions are inappropriate. We are thus undermining our own methods. He concludes that psychology at this historical moment must be redefined in its methods, its metatheoretical assumptions, its pedagogy and its ethical mission. The book begins to describe what would be involved in such a redefinition.

Bradley argues that psychology has been prematurely searching for causal relationships, attempting to legitimate itself by imitating the natural sciences. We should instead describe how experience becomes meaningful, attending to present contexts of action instead of focusing on antecedents. He argues that our theories must be reoriented to address contexts of human action instead of discrete variables and to engage with intersubjective aspects of action and understanding. He argues that the education of psychologists must be reoriented, to rely extensively on students' experiences and to overcome the hierarchy between teachers and students. And he argues that psychology should be guided by ethical goals, promoting justice and democracy.

In developing this methodological, metatheoretical, pedagogical and ethical argument, Bradley focuses on the concept of "experience." He adopts neither an empiricist nor a phenomenological account of this concept, but instead works toward a more complex view. The centrality of experience presents an epistemological dilemma: we ground most of our knowledge on experience, but we now know that experience is

mediated—by language, by social position, by cultural location. Bradley argues that, in order to resolve this dilemma, we must first understand how mediation works. He develops a productive and compelling account of how individual, intersubjective and social contexts contribute.

In order to understand its basic object (experience), Bradley argues that psychology must reorient in two fundamental ways. First, we must stop emphasizing past-to-present-to-future causal relationships and focus instead on whole synchronic contexts within which experience becomes meaningful. He builds on prior accounts—Lewin’s field theory and hermeneutic approaches, for example—that attend to the larger contexts that give behavior and experience meaning. He argues convincingly that our actions and understandings always occur within pre-structured, supra-individual spaces, and that we must draw on social theory and other fields to help us understand these spaces. Second, psychologists must attend to intersubjective aspects of relevant contexts. Intersubjectivity links supra-individual aspects of context to individuals’ experiences and orientations, describing our capacity to act and understand in concert with others in pre-structured social spaces. The descriptions of synchronic context and intersubjectivity, exploring what Bradley calls “the topography of the intersubjective field,” are among the most compelling parts of the book.

Bradley’s argument to this point sounds like many constructionist, discursive and hermeneutic psychologies. He argues against such psychologies, however, claiming that we must not abandon the scientific character of psychology. Instead of overthrowing causal, empiricist, truth-oriented approaches to psychology, he claims that psychology must aspire both to more hermeneutic, descriptive analyses and to more causal ones. Because of a premature overemphasis on causal relations, today’s psychologists must do extensive descriptive work first, in the same way that Linnaean taxonomies paved the way for Darwinian explanations in biology. This leads to a puzzle, however. Presumably this is not an evolutionary account of psychology, in which we attend to context and intersubjectivity during a descriptive phase and then, decades from now, transition into more adequate causal explanations. The synchronic, context-based and the diachronic, causal approaches to psychological science differ in their basic assumptions,

which will in some cases dictate conflicting approaches to a problem. So how can a unified science do both simultaneously, once we catch up on our descriptive work?

Bradley does not answer this question directly, but his ethically-centered account of psychology may provide a response. He argues that the scientific goals of psychology should be subordinate to the ethical ones, envisioning a “psychology whose rationale is in terms of justice rather than truth” (p.5). Psychological science is a tool within a “larger ethical venture.” Thus we need not obsess over reconciling causal and descriptive approaches, because both are simply tools for creating “partial, locatable, critical knowledges” that serve larger ethical ends. Bradley also describes specific ethical ends that psychology should adopt: we should “fight oppression,” “promote social justice” and pursue “the common good.”

In order for this to provide practical guidance to psychologists, of course, we will have to agree on what counts as “justice” and “the common good.” Given the diversity of values in the world, one person’s oppression can be another’s justice, and it is not clear that psychologists can or should develop one moral view to handle all problems. But Bradley is clearly right that psychology engages deeply with ethical issues and that we must face the questions raised by our discipline. Some work remains to be done in coordinating the methodological, metatheoretical, pedagogical and ethical aspects addressed in this ambitious book, but the book does important work in raising crucial issues and sketching some fruitful directions.